

Biden's Manichean vision



U.S. President Joe Biden inspects a Guard of Honour at the Windsor Castle west of London on June 13, 2021. | Photo Credit: AFP

Sreeram Chaulia 14 JUNE 2021 00:15 IST

UPDATED: 14 JUNE 2021

Dividing the world into democratic and autocratic camps is unrealistic.

The G7 summit in Cornwall, U.K., was noteworthy for the cohesive vibe among member states, buttressed by their shared identity of being democracies. After four years of irrelevance wrought by the illiberal former U.S. President, Donald Trump, this club of rich, industrialised countries has got a new lease of life under his liberal successor, Joe Biden, who believes that democracies should unite against authoritarian rivals.

In Mr. Biden's Manichean vision, the world is at an "inflection point between those who argue that autocracy is the best way forward and those who understand that democracy is essential". Disproving the "false narrative" that dictatorships are faster and more efficient, and refuting autocrats who claim that the age of democracy is over, are the driving forces of Mr. Biden's foreign policy.

At the Cornwall summit, his non-confrontational approach to his G7 counterparts signaled democracies can manage their differences, team up multilaterally and push back the influence and muscle-flexing of China and Russia.

An expanded coalition

To make sure that the messaging about team-building by democracies went across, the host of the Cornwall summit, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, invited four other democracies as guest participants – Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa. The combination of the G7 and the first three of these invitees has drawn attention to an expanded 'D10' coalition of democracies. Mr.

Biden's Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, Kurt Campbell, promotes D10 as a necessary instrument to "bridge European and regional (Asian) approaches to Chinese challenges."

Since Japan is the only democracy from Asia within the G7, forging a D10 with Australia, India and South Korea could corral the U.S.'s European and Indo-Pacific allies to present a transcontinental counterweight to China. A 78-year-old who built his career in American politics during the Cold War, Mr. Biden carries the liberal memories of that period when the U.S. mobilised allies across continents to beat back the Soviet Union.

Interdependent links

But what is different with today's 'new Cold War' is that power is more diffused around the world and economic interdependence transcends a neat division of the world into black (dictatorships) and white (democracies). For example, despite being a U.S. ally and a democracy, South Korea is wary of joining a formal D10 or Quad-plus alliance because its economy is interwoven with that of China.

India, which has been wooing the Europeans to bring their economic and military heft to the Indo-Pacific, would be happy to see a combined trans-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific formation like D10 that could counterbalance Chinese hegemony. But it cannot afford to alienate friendly undemocratic powers like Vietnam, Iran or Russia, all of which are vectors for India's ambitions of becoming a 'leading power' in the world. And for that matter, the Americans and Europeans are themselves not undiluted upholders of democracy. The U.S.'s allies in West Asia remain notoriously authoritarian, and European countries still cultivate client dictatorships in Africa.

As every democratic power has some authoritarian partners, should the Biden-led pitch for a "summit of democracies" and "contest with autocracies worldwide" be treated as hypocritical rhetoric? Politics is the art of the possible and so is geopolitics. The G7 and D10 are not idealistic alliances to spread democracy everywhere. They have to be selective in targeting adversaries and strike a balance among moral values, geo-strategic needs, and the complexities of the present multipolar world order. To the extent that cementing relationships with the principle of democracy helps corner specific undemocratic foes, there is a practical utility to D10. But these concepts cannot metastasise into rigid structures waging holy war between good and evil. Navigating ambiguities with nuanced policies is the key.

Sreeram Chaulia is a Professor and Dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs